

The Essence of Buddhism as Expounded by the Android Kannon, Mindar
– Overcoming manifold suffering to attain peace and tranquility –

The historical Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) passed away 2,500 years ago, and his teachings gradually spread via his disciples and other believers. Once artistic representations of the historical Buddha and other Buddhas appeared, it seems that the emergence of freestanding statuary led to a flourishing of Buddhism as people could now look to a concrete symbol that made the teachings more comprehensible and provided visible form to what they sought. This would have been about 500 years after the death of Siddhartha Gautama.

Buddhist statuary played a significant role in spreading Buddhism, but for two thousand years it did not exhibit much fundamental change. We, however, decided to make a completely new kind of Buddhist image – one that can move and talk.

Kannon is a savior figure that offers spiritual relief, a Buddha of compassion that heeds our prayers and helps facilitate their fulfillment. Kannon assumes many forms in answering our needs, and it is as an android that we sought a modern day expression of this Buddha. This completely new form of Buddhist image, the Kannon android named Mindar, is here to relieve people of the burden of their anxieties and suffering.

Mindar began giving Buddhist sermons on March 8, and many people have attended. Mindar wears no religious clothing and bears no religious articles. This is because we did not create an image of Kannon out of a robot. Rather, Kannon has transformed into a robot. It was necessary that the entire figure be a machine. The voice is purposely artificial. We took the liberty only of making the face human so that it could actually look at people and smile or visually express emotions such as sadness and melancholy. Those are things that it could not do just as a machine.

Seeing the face of a human but the body of a machine apparently makes some people feel uncomfortable the first time. But we are seeing more and more people joining their hands in prayer and bowing their heads once the sermon is over. Some people even try to touch Mindar as though it were a friend. Many visitors have expressed being deeply moved by seeing the figure of this Buddha move, speak, glance our way, look at us and move its hands while delivering the sermon.

We have also been welcoming many visitors from overseas because while the sermon is given in Japanese, English and Chinese subtitles appear in the projection mapping images. Some of these visitors feel uneasy about the notion of humans creating humans, let alone humans creating gods or Buddhas, seeing as it was God, after all, that created humans, and they ask questions in this regard. There are also apparently many people who receive a negative impression because they imagine Frankenstein when they hear the word “android.”

To us, who grew up with the likes of Gigantor and Astro Boy, a robot is something you can relate to like a friend, but that does not seem to be the case for people from overseas. Even today, the difference between how Japanese and non-Japanese view robots leaves an impression on me.

There are Buddhist priests as well that express extreme displeasure with a robot taking the place of priests whose job it should be to directly meet and speak impartially with people to provide them with peace of mind. Some members of the general public go so far as to suggest that we are just being lazy and shirking our duties. On the other hand, there are people who tell us that the sermon was easy to understand and resonated with them. Well, the world is full of different kinds of people. I just hope that they will take the time to listen to this Kannon’s sermon.

Even among the participants in the project, there are a variety of opinions regarding how Mindar should be allowed to evolve. For my part, I would like to see Mindar acquire knowledge, ultimately approaching a state similar to that of Siddhartha Gautama or others who underwent the training that allowed them to transcend suffering and attain tranquility. For the time being, though, I would just like Mindar to develop into a Kannon that can deliver sermons that are even easier to understand than they are now.

At present, Mindar expounds on the meaning of the Heart Sutra, a subject more appropriate for adults. The mayor of Kyoto, however, has expressed a desire for us create a version directed at children that could contribute to their spiritual development.

We created the very first Buddhist image to actually move and talk, and I eagerly await the major developments to come and sincerely hope it will serve to provide many people with spiritual peace and tranquility in their lives.